



# PROTECTING CHILDREN IN CAMBODIA FROM ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: THE WAY FORWARD

**Children in Cambodia are vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and abuse. According to Disrupting Harm's nationally representative household survey, 11% of internet-using children aged 12–17 had been subjected to clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year. This included children who were blackmailed into engaging in sexual activities, had their sexual images shared without their permission, or were coerced into engaging in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts. The legislation in Cambodia that addresses online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) is relatively comprehensive, but various barriers exist in the implementation of these laws. Public awareness of the risks and harms that children face online is low, and prevention efforts need improvement. The Disrupting Harm research clearly outlines the urgent steps needed to disrupt the harm of online sexual exploitation and abuse to children in Cambodia.**

## Recommended actions

Combating OCSEA and providing better support to victims requires comprehensive and sustained actions from policy makers, law enforcement, justice and social support professionals, the tech industry and the whole community. *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* lays out an actionable blueprint with which to protect children through a series of evidence-based recommendations spanning legislation, law enforcement, justice processes, social services and public awareness. These recommendations call on the Government of Cambodia and its partners to act, educate and invest.

## Act

- Amend legislation in line with the standards of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, the Lanzarote Convention and the Budapest Convention.
- Explicitly criminalise the live-streaming of child sexual abuse, online grooming and sexual extortion.
- Monitor and evaluate the implementation of the National Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Online Child Sexual Exploitation in Cambodia (2021–2025).
- Enhance data collection and monitoring of OCSEA cases at the local and national levels.
- Establish and maintain a connection to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation database to facilitate international cooperation and eliminate duplication of efforts. This database is an intelligence and investigative tool that allows specialised investigators to share data on cases of child sexual abuse.

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- Support the creation of an effective mechanism to ensure that international OCSEA referrals receive an appropriate level of police investigation.
- Increase awareness of existing hotlines and helplines as reporting and help-seeking mechanisms for OCSEA.
- Expedite criminal justice procedures involving child victims of OCSEA through the establishment of collaborative relationships between law enforcement, global social media and instant messaging platforms and national internet service providers to support timely investigation and prosecution.
- Avoid the unnecessary removal of child victims from their families and communities. If a child is to be removed from her/his home or community, an assessment should be made to determine whether this is in the best interests of the child. If shelter services are to be utilised, it should be for the shortest possible time and conditions should conform to international standards.
- Adopt a one-stop approach to support children impacted by OCSEA on their journey through the criminal justice system with a view to avoiding re-traumatisation, which can result from asking children to recount their abuse multiple times during the justice process.
- Develop and implement programmes that prepare child victims to engage with the criminal justice system.
- Establish a clear reporting and referral process for cases of OCSEA and ensure all service providers are appropriately trained to implement this process in a child-friendly manner.
- Provide law enforcement officers, prosecutors and court personnel with a standard information package to inform victims of OCSEA and their caregivers of all the relevant procedures and rights, including compensation.

## Educate

- Ensure mandatory, regular training on OCSEA and other online risks for all professionals in contact with children. This will ensure that they are aware of the fast-paced changes in digital technologies and the new patterns of offending. Integrate OCSEA knowledge into existing professional development systems, such as in police academy training and degree courses for social workers.
- Raise public awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the ways in which digital technology may be used by offenders to perpetrate or facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Invest in digital literacy and digital safety programmes for children and caregivers, including the risks of sharing sexual content online. Teach children about sex, consent, risk and their right to be protected from OCSEA.
- Teach caregivers about digital platforms/technologies and online safety, including the risks of OCSEA. Support caregivers in developing the skills required to talk to children about sex and sexuality, consent and boundaries, with a view to encourage dialogue about recognising and responding to sexual abuse and exploitation both online and offline.
- Ensure all awareness and education programmes and campaigns are evidence-based and developed through safe and ethical consultations with children, caregivers and teachers to reflect their perspectives. Regularly monitor, evaluate and modify these programmes and campaigns to confirm that they have the desired impact and do not inadvertently lead to harm.



## Invest

- Allocate resources to prevent and respond to OCSEA. Ensure there is sufficient funding for overall policy-making and coordination, public information and the education and empowerment of children. Make budgets available to support technical training on OCSEA for police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, child protection officers, medical staff, frontline social workers and teachers in order to ensure that they are kept up to date on the rapidly evolving patterns of offending.
- Allocate appropriate funding for the National Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Online Child Sexual Exploitation in Cambodia (2021–2025).
- Ensure social services (including medical, legal, psychological and reintegration) are available to child victims across the country, including in rural areas.
- Invest in the quality and availability of psychosocial support services for victims and survivors of OCSEA.
- Provide resources and training for child helpline staff so that they can provide quality information and advice. Helplines should be promoted as a source of information and support for children subjected to OCSEA and for peers, caregivers and others to obtain information about how they can support young people who disclose abuse.
- Invest in the requisite tools, equipment and capacity building to enable law enforcement to undertake OCSEA-related investigations, including proactive investigations.
- Dedicate resources to police and hotlines to improve data collection and monitoring of OCSEA cases, both on the national and local levels. The systematic recording and classification of cases facilitates the development of evidence-based prevention and response mechanisms to OCSEA.

## Key insights

Through various research activities, *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* identified six key insights:

1. In the past year, 11% of internet-using children aged 12–17 in Cambodia were subjected to clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse that included being blackmailed into engaging in sexual activities, having their sexual images shared without permission, or being coerced into engaging in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts. Scaled to the national population, this represents an estimated 160,000 children who may have been subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year. Boys reported such experiences almost twice as often as girls.
2. According to the household survey, most offenders of OCSEA were people already known to the child. These were often family members, adult friends, peers or romantic partners. People previously unknown to the child were responsible for approximately one in five instances of the OCSEA-related offences identified in the household survey.
3. Children mainly experienced OCSEA through the major social media platforms, with the most common platforms being Facebook/Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.
4. Children who were subjected to OCSEA crimes tended to confide in people within their interpersonal networks, particularly their friends, male caregivers and siblings. Helplines and the police were almost never avenues through which children sought help.
5. A range of promising initiatives driven by government and civil society are already underway in Cambodia; however, significant challenges still exist. The growing momentum and commitment to ensure that children in Cambodia are protected from OCSEA should be used to increase awareness and improve the skills and resources with which law enforcement, justice and social support workers can respond.
6. While the launch and ongoing implementation of the National Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Online Child Sexual Exploitation is an important step, other legislation, policies and standards still need to be enacted in Cambodia.

The full report and complete list of recommendations can be found at: [www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm](http://www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm)

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## About Disrupting Harm

*Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* is part of an unprecedented, multi-country research project on OCSEA, focusing on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. This large-scale research project draws on the expertise of ECPAT, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, and their global networks of partners. *Disrupting Harm* is supported by the [Fund to End Violence Against Children](#), through its Safe Online initiative.

In Cambodia, research took place from early 2020 until early 2021. It included interviews with high-level representatives from the Government of Cambodia and a range of public bodies and organisations active in the country. Research activities included a comprehensive analysis of the legislation, policy

and systems that address OCSEA in Cambodia, interviews with justice actors, a survey with frontline service providers, conversations with survivors and a nationally representative household survey of internet-using children and their caregivers.

Data from these multiple sources was compared and triangulated to produce the *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* national report. Throughout the drafting process of the *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia* report, the research team worked closely with Technical Working Group of the Cambodia National Council for Children. A detailed final review of the report by the Technical Working Group of the Cambodia National Council for Children took place on 16 May 2022 in Kampot.

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